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AUTHOR	Lashway, Larry
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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the role of the principal has become more critical in the success of schools. School improvement is often tied to principal performance, yet the practice of evaluating principal performance leaves a lot to be desired, according to some educators. This ERIC Digest reviews current principal evaluation practices and describes some emerging issues and alternatives. It begins with a discussion of how principals are typically evaluated, noting that while there is little evidence that principals or their districts see evaluation as a major problem, neither is there any indication that evaluation plays a significant role in school improvement. The Digest next discusses the shortcomings of current practices, stressing that because of the complex nature of the job, principal evaluation is difficult. The Digest then discusses the key elements of effective evaluation, what standards should be used, and what assessment instruments are available. It states that productive evaluation processes are anchored in explicit standards that make expectations clear. Increasingly, policymakers are turning to comprehensive national standards, such as those devised by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium. Checklists seem to be the most commonly used assessment instrument. Portfolios are also being used to complement checklists. (WFA)

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Larry Lashway

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Improving Principal Evaluation

By Larry Lashway

In recent years, educators and policymakers have agreed that principals are critical to school success and have repeatedly pointed out the need to aggressively recruit and select highly qualified candidates. Surprisingly, however, the evaluation of principals has attracted much less interest. Recent policy documents on school leadership have largely ignored the topic, and the empirical research base is very thin (Ann Weaver Hart 1993).

Moreover, discussions of typical principal evaluation practices have often been highly critical (Kenneth Leithwood and colleagues 1994; Douglas Reeves in press). Reeves characterizes most leadership assessments as "infrequent, late, unhelpful, and largely a source of administrative bother."

However, growing pressure to increase student achievement, particularly the passage of No Child Left Behind, has generated new thinking about the role of principal evaluation in boosting individual and organizational performance. While still unstudied and unproven, these "best practice" reforms offer promising avenues for improvement. This *Digest* reviews current practices and describes some emerging issues and alternatives.

How Are Principals Typically Evaluated?

While indepth research is scarce, several surveys have provided snapshots of principal evaluation practices. A 1998 study by NAESP (James Doud and Earl Keller) found that 76 percent of respondents reported being evaluated at least once a year, 13 percent every two or three years, and 10 percent rarely or never. The evaluations were most often carried out by central office personnel, although respondents reported a growing trend to involve parents, teachers, and principals themselves.

A sampling of seventeen California districts (David Stine 2001) found three types of evaluations in use. *Checklists* rated principals on a variety of behaviors or traits, ranging from time management to loyalty. *Free form evaluations* consisted of a narrative. *Evaluation by objectives* measured principal performance against a set of predetermined goals. Evaluations often combined different formats, resulting in a wide variety of procedures. An examination of evaluation practices in North Carolina also found great diversity, concluding that "the only consistency across the state was a considered lack of consistency" (UNC Center for School Leadership Development no date).

A nationwide survey by Reeves found that principals agreed that their evaluations were generally positive (89 percent), accurate (79 percent), and consistent with job expectations (76 percent). However, fewer (around 60 percent) found the evaluation process had improved their performance or motivation, and only 47 percent said their evaluations were specific enough to know what behaviors should be changed.

While there is little evidence that either principals or their districts see evaluation as a major problem area, neither is there any indication that it plays a significant role in school improvement efforts.

What Are the Shortcomings of Current Evaluation Practices?

Rick Ginsberg and Tom Thompson (1993) note that principal evaluation is inherently difficult because the nature of principals' work is complex, ambiguous, and highly contextual. Developing standard procedures that could reliably work in all situations is almost impossible. For example, an evaluation that used parent surveys might unfairly penalize a principal who had just made an unpopular but necessary decision.

Reeves points out that in many evaluation instruments the standards are unclear or nonspecific ("demonstrates effective organizational skills"). Others are incoherent or unrealistic ("No disruptions. Yes or no."). Reeves also says that many evaluation instruments treat leadership skills as "binary" traits that either exist or do not exist, whereas in reality many skills fall along a continuum. A binary approach offers little useful feedback to a principal who is clearly proficient in a skill but still has room to improve.

An even more serious charge is that assessments are inconsequential: Little is learned and not much happens. Leithwood and colleagues concluded that many leader appraisals were conducted out of a sense of duty and had little impact on future performance. One of Reeves' respondents wrote, "Generally I have felt rather empty when no suggestions were given to me for improvement. Whenever evaluations are all positive and no suggestions for improvement, it leaves no motivation for growth and improvement." Others told of signing and returning an evaluation form that had simply appeared in their mailbox, or complained about unknowledgeable supervisors, lack of feedback, and the absence of any evaluation at all.

What Are the Key Elements of Effective Evaluation?

Transforming principal evaluations from a perfunctory bureaucratic chore into a tool for growth requires a cyclical process rather than an annual event. Leithwood and colleagues recommend that evaluation systems include preparation (articulating procedures, policies, and purposes); data collection (using multiple data sources); and followup (providing feedback and generating professional growth plans).

Reeves emphasizes that productive evaluation processes are anchored in explicit standards that make the expectations clear to the district as well as the principal, and that also distinguish levels of proficiency. He suggests four categories: "exemplary," "proficient," "progressing," and "not meeting standards." The distinctions are important because each level implies a different kind of followup. Progressing principals may benefit from coaching on specific skills (perhaps provided by exemplary leaders whose best professional development activity may be sharing their expertise with others).

Reeves also underlines the importance of involving the principal as an active partner who helps determine evaluation criteria and takes the lead role in crafting an appropriate professional growth plan. Finally, he says that evaluation process should be both candid and challenging. For example, "proficient" principals should understand that proficient is acceptable—but is not the same as exemplary.

An evaluation process incorporating many of these elements has been developed by the Center for School Leadership Development at the University of North Carolina. The process begins with a self-assessment aligned with state and national standards for school leaders. Unlike traditional checklists, this assessment requires principals not just to rate themselves but to provide evidence to support their rating. A rubric provides concrete descriptions of performance at three different levels: "exemplary performance," "adequate performance," and "performance needs improvement."

The principal then discusses the self-assessment with his or her supervisor, identifying areas for improvement. The supervisor's role is to provide candid feedback on the principal's self-assessment and also suggest goals for the professional growth plan (which typically includes two to four goals). For each goal, the plan establishes strategies that will be pursued, evidence that will document achievement of the goal, and a timeline. The principal and supervisor have periodic conferences to monitor and discuss progress, followed by a summative conference.

What Standards Should Be Used?

No matter how thoughtful the process, evaluations will have little impact unless the criteria are both substantive and relevant. Traditionally, principals have been evaluated on everything from organizational skills to personal character, using checklists with little more coherence than a shopping list. Increasingly, however, policymakers and practitioners have turned to comprehensive national standards, such as those from the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC).

The ISLLC standards provide a credible foundation for evaluation since they reflect a broad professional consensus on essential leadership skills. However, they have not yet generated a great deal of empirical research, so only sparse data exist on their effectiveness as instruments for change. Thomas Glass (2003) found that the criteria used by superintendents when hiring secondary principals were not completely consistent with the ISLLC standards, suggesting a possible "disconnect" between the standards and "the *real* world of selecting, hiring and evaluating secondary principals." While the fault here may be with superintendents' practices rather than inadequate standards, adapting the standards to the needs of practitioners may take some work.

In addition, use of broad national standards can blur the lines between input and outcomes. The ISLLC standards are process-oriented; they describe how effective principals behave. But evaluators may also be interested in *results*. Has parental involvement increased? Have truancy rates gone down? Are test scores up? In the eyes of some, an effective principal is a leader who gets results, not one who shows a particular pattern of behaviors.

This outcome-oriented view has a common-sense appeal and is implicit in any evaluation system that uses goal-setting activities. However, most analysts urge caution in elevating any single measure as the standard of success. Reeves notes that while principals can control their own behaviors, they don't control everything in their environment. If a principal's progress in raising test scores is overpowered by a sudden change of school boundaries that brings in large numbers of low-performing students, that year's test scores will not provide a meaningful evaluation.

What Instruments Are Available?

Districts seeking to upgrade principal evaluation often devote considerable time to finding a suitable preexisting assessment. Lashway (1999) noted that there were many commercial leadership assessments available, but that few were specifically designed for school leaders and that none could directly measure job performance. However, used as part of a carefully crafted assessment and development process, these instruments were capable of offering insights into principals' leadership behaviors and skills.

By far the greatest number of assessment instruments are home-grown, typically taking the form of checklists. The limitation of the checklist approach, combined with the difficulty of developing and validating more formal instruments, has led many districts to experiment with portfolios.

Portfolios are not actually instruments but "conceptual containers" into which principals can place a wide variety of artifacts documenting their achievements. Catherine Hackney (1999) has described a typical process. After identifying a goal as the focus, the principal then gathers evidence demonstrating progress toward the desired outcome. Depending on the goal, relevant evidence might include items such as parent newsletters, meeting minutes, records of dropout rates, test scores, and handbooks.

Portfolios are highly flexible and easily tailored to the needs of individuals. However, without careful structuring, that flexibility makes it easy for the portfolio to degenerate into an even more undisciplined version of the checklist. Hackney warns against "scrapbooks" and says the value of the portfolio is the opportunity for personal reflection. "The emphasis must be on the individual's self-examination, the value of the artifacts that represent his or her work, the rationale used as defense of the product and the growth experienced as a result."

By themselves, portfolios do not align principal evaluation with the need to improve student achievement. However, when focused on instructional goals, they provide an evidence-oriented process that spurs school leaders to think more deeply about the impact they have on student performance.

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